

Squatters given £9m mansion

By Christian Gysin

A GROUP of squatters who broke into a £9million house have been told they can stay there rent free. They have struck a deal with the housing association which owns the 15-bedroom property.

The group of around 20 broke in three months ago and plan to remain for at least six months more at the Victorian house in Hampstead, North London. Such a house would normally fetch up to £8,000 a week in rent, estate agents said yesterday.

The squatters, who call themselves The Collective, wrote to the housing association in an attempt to strike a deal shortly after breaking in. A few weeks later, Circle 33 Housing Association – which bought the house for £8.770,000 in June last year – agreed the squatters could stay, in return for ensuring its security and upkeep.

A spokesman for the squatters – who prefer to call themselves environmental caretakers – said yesterday that they were delighted with the outcome of their negotiations.

When the house is redeveloped they hope to move on to another of the capital's empty homes. The group marked their arrival in Hampstead by introducing themselves to their neighbours through leaflets.

They not only gave their telephone numbers out, but in some cases lectured the neighbours on environmental issues.

'It was strange when they first arrived,' said one neighbour last night. 'They were talking about the environment all the time. Another simply extolled the virtues of organic food. But they have been no trouble.' Yesterday, a local estate agent estimated that the property in Fitzjohn's Avenue would normally command rents of between £4,500-£8,000 a week.

All Nathan, lettings manager at Hamptons International in Hampstead, added: 'We have never known a



Rambling: The 15-bedroom house in Hampstead

single Victorian house to come on to the market as most are divided into flats. If it did, it would be snapped up very quickly.

Yesterday, the squatters' spokesman, known only as Jack, insisted the new residents would look after the building. A sign on the front door said: 'Legal warning – section 6 Criminal Law Act 1977 - take notice ... that we live in this property, it is our home and we intend to stay here ... The Occupiers.'

Another squatter called Andy chatted in the gravel driveway of the property. 'We do not want any problems and so far things have been great,' he explained. 'It is rather nice to have a good rapport with the neighbours.'

One such neighbour who did not want to be named said: 'They all seem to be friendly, they wave hello when they come and go. We really haven't heard a peep out of them.'

'It's a bit bizarre them being allowed to live rent-free. It's not really fair, but I feel safer having them here.'

The squatters say their 'collective' is made up of around 20 individuals,

allowed to remain, and after full consultation with immediate neighbours we employed solicitors to prepare a licence to occupy,' said a spokesman.

'There has been no feedback from neighbours to suggest any anti-social behaviour.'

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